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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated how well the Council for Exceptional Children's "Code of Ethics" and "Standards for Professional Practice" (originally adopted and disseminated in 1983) have been implemented. A brief literature review examined the development and dissemination of the standards. Analysis of completed questionnaires of 171 (out of 744) Alabama special educators found that 87.8% of the respondents did not have copies of the standards and thus do not use them for guidance in meeting professional responsibilities. Those who do use the standards find occasion to use each of the 67 standards at some time. Possible reasons for this low usage are offered and include redundancy of the standards with existing personal values of educators and lack of knowledge of the standards' existence. Includes 14 references. (DB)

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# The Status of Implementation of Professional Standards in Special Education: An Alabama Study

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There are forces influencing change in the field of special education at this time. Educational planners and decision makers must be aware of these forces and consider their effect on programs for exceptional children and youth. Yates (1987) identified a wide range of current and emerging forces which must influence educational planning in special education: demography, economy and finance, professionalism, technology, and societal values. Each force has the potential of impacting significantly on special education.

The ability of special education planners to influence the development of these forces is limited. Demographic changes and shifts occur as a function of societal decisions and values. Economic and financial forces originate in the business and government sectors. The development and use of technology usually occur outside of education: educators become the consumers of technology rather than its developers. Societal values are reflected by educators and transmitted to our youth; however, they are not dictated by educators.

The one notable exception to the pattern of little influence on change is in the area of professionalism. Special educators do have a major responsibility for developing and monitoring their own profession, including establishing and enforcing standards of practice for persons in the field. In this way, special educators have an opportunity to influence the forces of change, which can only be realized if standards are fully implemented and become part of the decision making process in special education.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) adopted a code of ethics and standards of practice in November of 1983. The code was distributed to all active members of the Council for Exceptional Children. Practicing special educators were expected to begin implementing the new standards at that time. No enforcement procedures were established by the Council for Exceptional Children to assure compliance with the standards. It can be assumed that mature, responsible educators would see the need for standards and would comply willingly. There is a need to ascertain if the assumption of willing compliance is correct.

A code of ethics and some standards of practice provide the means by which a profession can influence many events. Special educators have in the standards a document which can be used to chart future direction for the profession. Realizing the impact of these significant documents, leaders (The Professional Standards Committee) in the field through the professional organization (CEC, Delegate Assembly, 1983) developed and published The Code of Ethics and the Standards for Professional Practice. Six years after the code and the standards were published it is critical to know if special education professionals are adhering to them. Heller (1983) cautioned that a trademark of any quality profession is its willingness to establish and abide by a code of ethics and standards in professional activities. He further emphasized that special educators have now established both a code of ethics and standards. Heller clearly stated, "adherence to their principles remains to be realized" (p. 199).

Given the magnitude of the potential influence of these documents, a two-part question stated: How have these ethics and standards been disseminated since their publication and how widely have they been used? To address this question, a study was needed to determine how well the standards were being implemented.

The first action in response to the question was to examine the literature. The search included the development of professional ethics for special educators, the dissemination of standards, and the impact of ethics on educational decisions.

## Development

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) recognized the need for professional standards from its inception. This need was given a high priority at the first annual meeting in 1923 and continues today to be a part of the Council's mission statement (Heller & Ridenhour, 1983). This

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mission is reflected by the "Professional Standards for Personnel in Education of Exceptional Children" report adopted by the CEC Delegate Assembly in 1966. That report was not replaced until 1976 with the report, "Guidelines for Personnel in the Education of Exceptional Children." The Professional Standards Committee was also appointed for the purpose of continuous reviews of professional standards (Heller & Ridenhour, 1983).

Three significant developments have influenced the adoption of special education standards since 1976. First, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) implemented a new standard (2.1.2 Special Education) which requires the training institution to provide students with skills and knowledge sufficient to provide appropriate education for exceptional students (NCATE, 1982). Second, the Virginia CEC Federation recommended in 1981 that CEC should develop a code of ethics and standards of practice. The acceptance of this resolution expanded the original mission of the Professional Standards Committee. And third, the CEC Board of Governors approved in 1982 the Professional Standards Committee's Action Plan for 1982-83. A process was set forth to ensure that the standards represented the concerns and needs of the membership. The resulting standards were compared to those established by other organizations which represented specific special education professionals (Heller, 1982). The resulting standards were significant because they created the potential for adherence to and enforcement of the ethics code for the first time (Heller & Ridenhour, 1983).

Without enforcement as recommended by Stephens (1985), or licensure as recommended by Heller and Horn (1985), the standards would not move special education from a semiprofessional status to being a full-fledged profession. The magnitude of the impact of these vital professional documents rests on the action of wide dissemination to special educators.

## Dissemination

The limited amount of literature since 1983 on special education ethics in general and the CEC Standards of Practice adopted that year provided a basis for concern pertaining to effectiveness of current dissemination of the standards within the profession. In the same vein, Maple (1983) noted that the issue of professional ethics is seldom included in discussions of teacher preparation. She viewed the process of adopting ethical standards as providing a catalyst to address the issue of excellence in teaching and implementing needed changes.

Recently, Bursuck and Epstein (1987) published the results of a survey conducted to determine the critical research priorities in the area of learning disabilities as well as the number of published articles about the identified issues in two leading learning disabilities journals. Neither ethics nor standards were cited as an issue of perceived need by the leaders in the field of learning disabilities. Ethics was not included as a topic of any of the articles. The findings from this study clearly reflect the fact that for special educators dissemination and discussion of ethical standards are not important issues. Bursuck and Epstein's findings were important for the present study in identifying the issues which were not chosen as much as those that were.

Turnbull and Barber (1984) maintained that issues of the professional ethical dimension, more than ever, command immediate attention. They supported their position by noting cases in which the courts deferred to professional judgments when making judicial decisions about the rights of the handicapped.

A search of the literature shows that not many special educators have addressed ethics as an important issue, the few who have addressed it view it as very significant, and some special educators see that the need for widely disseminated knowledge of ethics is inherent in the daily dilemmas which impinge on them. Bateman (1982) emphasized the daily dilemmas of situations in conflict between professional responsibility and school policy, and conflicts between legal and professional concerns. She reminded special educators that the standards were designed to guide professional behavior and decision making.

Dobson and Dobson (1983) noted the importance of congruency between teacher beliefs and practice. They asserted that some educators choose not to assume responsibility for their actions

in teaching. The point of a code of ethics and standards by which they are interpreted is not rights, but responsibilities.

Whether classroom teacher, administrator, or teacher educator, the ethical requirements for special education are categorized in standards of behavior for the professional in relation to exceptional individuals and their families, to professional employment, and to other professions. It does not appear by the literature that special educators consider these relationships worthy of wide discussion.

A study conducted at The University of Alabama in 1987 was designed to investigate the status of the CEC Standards of Practice at that time. The research question posed was: Have special educators made the Standards part of their daily practice? The study was confined to special education teachers in the state of Alabama. A list was obtained of 744 special educators who attended the February, 1986 Super Conference of the Alabama Federation Council for Exceptional Children. These special educators were chosen as subjects for the study because they were active enough in their profession to attend a professional conference. It was assumed they would be active in other professional areas, such as ethics and standards, as well. The special educators were sent a questionnaire asking them about their use of the standards of practice. Participants were asked to indicate if they were classroom teachers, administrators, or teacher educators. Question Two asked, "Do you now have a copy of the CEC Standards for Professional Practice readily available to you?" The third question was, "Have you intentionally referred to the Standards of Practice since 1983 for guidance in meeting your professional responsibilities?" If the response to Question Three was "no" the respondents were instructed to stop at that point and return the questionnaire. If the response was "yes" they were asked to indicate which specific standards they had used. A list of the standards was provided in the questionnaire. There were a total of 67 standards under three main headings: Professionals in Relation to Exceptional Persons and Their Families, Professional Employment, and Professionals in Relation to the Profession and Other Professionals. Part One, Professionals in Relation to Exceptional Persons and Their Families, included instructional responsibilities, management of behavior, support procedures, parent relationships, and advocacy. Part Two, Professional Employment, included certification and qualification, employment, assignment and role, and professional development. Part Three, Professionals in Relation to the Profession and Other Professionals, included the profession and other professionals.

A completed questionnaire was returned by 171 special educators, a return rate of 22.9%. Twenty one (12.2%) of the respondents checked "yes" on Question Two, with 150 (87.8%) checking "no." The same number checked "yes" or "no" respectively on Question Three. Each standard was used by at least one of the 21 persons who answered "yes" to Question Three.

The findings reveal that a majority (87.8%) of the respondents do not have copies of the standards of their profession. They consequently do not use them for guidance in meeting their professional responsibilities. Those who do use the standards find occasion to use each of the 67 at some time. If these respondents are representative of Alabama special educators in general, then there is serious cause for concern. If standards of the profession do not guide the behavior of these persons in their activities with exceptional individuals, then what does? Why are the standards not used more frequently? Are the standards inadequate to meet the needs of special educators? Do the standards place an undue burden on special educators? These questions need to be answered if the standards are to become the guiding principles which regulate the behavior of special education professionals toward exceptional individuals. The findings indicate that the use of standards by special educators is a concern of relatively little importance. It now becomes necessary to determine why they are not seen as important.

Several possible reasons can be postulated. It may be that the values expressed in the standards so accurately reflect the personal values of special educators that the standards are redundant. Special educators therefore can rely on their own value system for guidance secure in the knowledge that they also conform to the standards of the profession.

Many special educators may not be aware of the standards, even though they were published in a document all members of the Council for Exceptional Children received. Members of CEC who have

joined since 1983 would not necessarily have the document.

Special educators who are just entering the profession may not be aware of the standards. The topic may not be addressed adequately in teacher education programs.

While on the other hand, special educators may see themselves as employees, not as responsible professionals. They simply do what "the boss" tells them with no concern for professional implications.

The high visibility of the legal profession in protecting the rights of exceptional individuals may have lulled special educators into believing they have no responsibility. The lawyers and the courts act as the conscience of the profession.

Special educators may believe it is the responsibility of state and local boards of education to set standards. In that case, they may see the CEC Standards for Professional Practice as subordinate to board policy or completely unnecessary.

The pressures of everyday concerns may override abstract and theoretical issues such as ethics and standards. The demands of the job may not allow time for professional activities.

This study raised a number of important questions which members of the Council for Exceptional Children must address if the CEC Standards for Professional Practice are to be widely adopted. It is of no value whatsoever to have standards if they are not used. It is especially important to accurately determine the real reasons special educators do not use the standards. It may be that the standards are so implicit in their actions that special educators do not realize they are using them. In that case, there is no cause for concern. On the other hand, special educators may be oblivious to the need for common, consistent treatment of exceptional individuals by members of the profession. This is a serious defect which would need remediation.

This study can serve as a pilot for a nationwide study regarding the status of standards in special education. Alabama special educators may or may not be representative of special educators in general. A study of national scope could determine if the Alabama study is representative, and if so, ascertain why special educators are not using the standards they have developed for themselves.

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